

"A Plan and an Illustration."
1875

In The Democratic Party, by Melusina Fay Peirce,
Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, pp. 36-37.
Fisch and Haskell, Additions to Cohen's Bibliography;
Burks, Bibliography.

Proportional Representation.

The most important problem that is now attracting the interest of advanced thinkers in politics is that of Proportional Representation. There is no reason why the government of the majority should not frequently be as oppressive a despotism to the minority as any ever devised by an absolute and irresponsible monarch. In fact, unless the representatives of the minority are present in sufficient force to keep the balance of power almost in equilibrium, or at least to see that all the sides of every question are fairly and strongly stated in the representative body, this oppression must ensue; and the democratic party is but just emerging from the most fearful phase of this very thing. Knowing its strength, the whole country considered, to be numerically greater than that of the opposite party, it has yet seen measures passed in Congress over its head by a two-thirds vote, that were not only cruel, tyrannical, and outrageous against its own members in the southern states, but were also, in its judgment, directly subversive of the foundations of Constitutional Liberty.¹³

If such an ignominious and humiliating experience for themselves, and such possible despotism toward their brethren, cannot rouse up democrats to the dangers of the present system of mere Majority Representation, I know not what can; and, indeed, one of the ablest men of the party, Mr. Buckalew, of Pennsylvania, is already writing and experimenting upon Proportional Representation. Other schemes than his are also in the field, but the general complaint against them all is, I believe, that they are too intricate to be easily understood, and too cumbersome to be readily managed. With universal suffrage upon us as it is, the first thing to be looked at in any measure of universal application is, whether it is universally intelligible; or in other words, we must have a suffrage that everybody, down to the just-landed foreigner or the newly emancipated slave, can comprehend and use. Without considering, therefore, the systems which have been criticised for their complexity (for this alone, in my judgment, condemns them beforehand for popular use), the special object which I have at heart in this essay is to call attention to the suggestion of a keen thinker which seems to me so simple and so feasible that there can scarcely be an objection to its adoption, provided the voters of the country could be roused into a sufficient interest in the matter to induce them to elect a Congress which will take it in hand.

A Plan and an Illustration.

"In choosing representatives to Congress," says this gentleman, "whatever scheme of Proportional Representation you adopt, the first step must be the abolition of the District System." "Now," he asks, "why not do simply that? Why not abandon the district system, and give every man one vote for a congressional representative, as he has now, but let him cast it for anybody in the state whom he chooses, instead of limiting him to a candidate in his own district; and then, in counting the ballots, if there are to be six, or ten, or twenty representatives, let the six, or ten, or twenty representatives who have the highest number of votes be declared elected."

--Let us take the state of Massachusetts as an illustration. That state elects ten members to Congress, and year after year the entire delegation is republican; whereas but three-fifths of the voters in the state are republican, the other two-fifths being democratic, excepting a fraction of a tenth, which is eccentric. Thus, one-third of the voters of Massachusetts are without representation,--as perpetually and practically disfranchised as so many women. The votes cast before the Forty-second Congress numbered 145,632.* It should have taken, on an average, one-tenth of that number, or 14,560 votes, to elect each of the ten representatives; instead of which it only took 8,700 votes, or one-sixteenth, because the voting was by districts, and in each district the republicans were in the majority.

Now, suppose that before that election the district system had been abandoned,--for, let us remember, that system is no organic part of our Constitution, but is re-enacted every ten years by Congress, simply as a convenience. Then, by proper combination among themselves, the 87,000 republicans could have put in six men, the 48,800 democrats could have secured three men, and the 10,000 labor reformers and prohibitionists, by uniting on one man, could have also their representative; because one or two of the elected candidates would probably have received a good many more than the required tenth of the votes, and one or two would have received a good many less, so that the candidate of the eccentrics, though commanding only 10,000 votes, would yet have been within the ten highest. Thus the Massachusetts delegation would have truly represented the politics of the state, and over fifty-eight thousand of her votes would not have been thrown away, as was the case under the present system.

Such is the electoral reform on the principle of Proportional Representation suggested by one of the scientific men of our country. Its advantage is its extreme simplicity,--while at the same time it is the first step that must be taken in any plan of the kind. Its result would be that if any man of ability in Massachusetts had a generous love of his country, and a lively interest in the public welfare, he could go freely before his state and ask for the confidence and the votes of one-tenth part of her citizens,

* This essay was written in 1872, and the figures taken from the vote for the then Congress.

on the basis of whatever views, principles, and aspirations he and they had in common. He could do this, too, either in the enthusiasm of his youth, the prime of his manhood, or the wisdom of his age, instead of having to take up politics as a trade for the long series of obscure and intriguing years through which men must now ignominiously work their way up to their seats in the national capitol. And is there a single doubt that our people would thus be represented by infinitely abler, truer, nobler men, than is possible under our present system, even at its best? Instead of having Americans truckling for the Irish, or the German, or the Negro vote, for the vote of the prohibitionist, or the vote of the labor reformer, each race that had members enough within State lines to elect a representative, would elect its own, and that the very best man it had, or could get, to look after its interests;--and when this becomes the case, the cant about the "educational power of the ballot" will begin to be a truth, instead of the merest buncombe that it now is.